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MailOnline

'We'll bomb, gas and burn the bailiffs': After making life a misery for villagers for 10 years, travellers in Gypsy City won't go without a fight

By [Daily Mail Reporter](#)

Last updated at 4:27 PM on 15th March 2011

- **Basildon Council approve eviction order for largest illegal traveller site**
- **Furious residents threaten: 'It will be like Belfast, they haven't a clue'**
- **Young mother: 'They'll have to kill us and our children before we leave'**

Travellers on the UK's biggest illegal camp threatened to 'bomb, gas and burn' bailiffs as plans for a £18million eviction were voted through.

They have accused the council of 'ethnic cleansing' and police fear that Britain's biggest eviction could turn violent if anti-capitalist groups join the resistance.

More than 500 men, women and children are illegally camped on the controversial Dale Farm camp in Crays Hill, near Billericay in Essex, which has appeared on Channel 4's Big Fat Gypsy Wedding.

Basildon Council voted overwhelmingly in favour, 28 for and 10 against, of using taxpayers' money to send in the bulldozers and evict 100 families from 51 greenbelt plots.

Nora Gore, a young mother-of-two, said the travellers would not go without a fight. she said: 'We will bomb them, we will gas them, we will burn them if we have to but we are going to fight.

'They will have to murder our children to get them to leave, they will have to murder us. We are not going to lay down our cards and leave.'

Tony Ball, leader of the Conservative-run council, told last night's meeting: 'There cannot be one rule for one and another rule for others. The law of this land must be upheld, it's a national duty to make sure this is done.'

TOM RAWSTORNE reports on the traveller site that has made life a misery for one Essex village for ten years

Strung between the two scaffold towers that guard the entrance to Europe's largest illegal traveller site, a banner flaps in the breeze.

In 2ft-high lettering, it spells out a simple message: 'We won't go.'

Pass beneath it, negotiating the barricade of car tyres, and enter this sprawling, litter-strewn shanty town on the edge of the Essex village of Crays Hill and it is a statement re-iterated at every turn.



Defiant: The traveller community at Dale Farm in Crays Hill, Essex, say they will refuse to leave without a fight

'They won't be moving us from here without a fight,' vows 69-year-old Mary Anne McCarthy. Mother-of-four Mary Sheridan, who has spent eight years living on what is the most hotly disputed piece of land in Britain, adds: 'We're not off anywhere, any time.'

'I don't want the children to see any violence — but they will have to come and take me kicking and screaming.'

And 34-year-old Mary won't be on her own. One resident named only as Nora told the Travellers Times website: 'We have things up our sleeves. It will be like Belfast if they come in here. They haven't a clue what they are up against.'

Others are talking of a 'state of war', and up to 1,000 fellow travellers have vowed to stand their ground against what they describe as 'ethnic cleansing', while plans are already advanced to bus in supporters to increase their numbers.



Bill: Clearing Crays Hill - which featured in the TV series My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding - could cost the taxpayer in excess of £20 million



Numbers: There are fears thousands of travellers from other sites could arrive to resist the eviction of Crays Hill

They will be put up in caravans and tents and provided with food and water for as long as the Battle of Crays Hill lasts.

There is a heightened sense of urgency to the arrangements because, for the first time in a decade, there's a realistic possibility that the country's most notorious traveller site will be bulldozed and its

residents evicted.

Last night, Basildon Council approved an eviction order which is likely to give the travellers 28 days' notice to move.

If that happens, it is estimated that clearing Crays Hill — which featured in the TV series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* — could cost the taxpayer in excess of £20 million.

Of that sum, Basildon Borough Council fears it may have to find £8 million. This would include £5 million for the actual clearance, to pay for bailiffs, temporary accommodation for those moved off the land and to cover any medical emergencies.

A further £1.5 million has been put aside as a contingency, with the same again to cover costs following the clearance, such as restoration of the land, legally protecting other nearby land to prevent its occupation by displaced travellers, and any future litigation.

Meanwhile, Essex Police's involvement could cost as much as £12.2million. Site clearance would take place over many weeks, requiring round-the-clock policing.

Further, there are concerns that anarchist groups and other protesters will turn up to show their solidarity with the protesters..



© Peter Lawson/Eastnews Press Agency Ltd

Protesters backing the travellers' right to stay show their support outside last night's meeting



Residents at last night's meeting were urging the council to go ahead with the eviction to stop local green spaces being sold off to pay for the Olympic Villiage

The force has earmarked £3 million from its own funds and has requested a further £9.2 million from the Home Office to cover the cost of overtime and to bring in officers from other forces to support the operation.

This, then, is the immense cost of an eight-year fight, during which travellers have tried every conceivable legal trick to try to persuade the authorities they are entitled to inhabit this patch of Green Belt.

There have been planning hearings, public inquiries and appeals to the highest court in the land — funded by taxpayers' millions through Legal Aid.

Their argument is simple: they moved to the site because they had nowhere else to go. To evict them would be to threaten their very way of life.



Landowner: Len Gridley says his £450,000 property would only be worth £150,000 if he tried to sell it

But the local villagers don't buy this argument and never have. Ever since the travellers set up home on their doorstep several years ago, their lives have been turned upside down. They have watched their village school transformed into the worst performing primary in the country and the value of their properties plunge.

The locals have always insisted that, out of principle, no one — be they travellers or property developers — should be allowed to develop Green Belt land.

As for the travellers' argument that they deserve special treatment, villagers have fought tirelessly to try to expose this as legally baseless.

Rather than having nowhere else to go, it has emerged that many of the travellers gave up council homes and pitches on legal sites to move to Crays Hill.

They are not there out of desperation, opponents say, but out of a hard-headed commercial desire to grab a piece of valuable Home Counties land.

That's why, for the sake of these villagers as well as for communities facing similar problems across Britain, the battle for Crays Hill is one that the authorities must not lose.

One of the local people most aggrieved is builder Len Gridley. For while most Britons have enjoyed a rapid increase in the value of their houses over the past decade, Mr Gridley has seen the opposite happen to his home.

His three-bedroom bungalow, set in one-and-a-half acres on the edge of Crays Hill, should be worth about £450,000. But if he put it on the market he's sure it would fetch only £150,000.

Villagers have seen the value of the properties hit, with £50 million wiped off the worth of 400 houses in Crays Hill

The reason is the travellers' site at the bottom of his garden which has blighted his quality of life. Mr Gridley has suffered a catalogue of abuse and damage to his property.

Once, when repairing fence panels damaged by the travellers, he and his brother were bombarded with bricks and stones.



Notice served: The police are preparing a massive operation to clear the site

On another occasion his 74-year-old father — with whom Mr Gridley then lived and who has since died — was attacked as he drove home.

'He was in his Rover Metro when a traveller in a 4x4 deliberately rammed him,' says Len, 51.

'They wrote off the vehicle. We called the police but, as usual, they said they wouldn't go onto the site.

'It's what they always say, and it's why I haven't got the time of day for the police now.'

Other villagers share his sense of betrayal by the authorities. Like Mr Gridley, they have seen the value of the properties hit, with estimates that £50 million has been wiped off the worth of the 400 houses that comprise Crays Hill.

This devaluation has been officially acknowledged. Mr Gridley's council tax bill has been reduced by more than £500, after his house dropped from valuation band E to band B. Other properties in the village have also been re-banded.

Since the arrival of the travellers, the reputation of the village primary school has plummeted. Last year, it was named as the worst-performing primary in the country, with every child failing English and maths SATs exams.

Once it had a register of 200. Now there are only 64 pupils — every one believed to be from the travellers' site.

Native villagers moved their children elsewhere and governors resigned en masse after becoming concerned about the quality of education. As the latest Ofsted report acknowledges, many travellers' children have special educational needs requiring extra tuition and funding.

The presence of these children was also disruptive because their attendance was highly erratic (in September 2006 the school was labelled the worst in the country for truancy when all but 15 of its registered pupils failed to turn up for the new term).

Irish travellers, led by a family known as the Sheridans, started to buy the legal plots for up to £50,000 each.



Attrition: The battle for Dale Farm has raged for eight years. This protest by traveller children was back in 2005

The area at the heart of this dispute, Dale Farm, was first occupied in the Eighties by English gypsies who legally settled on part of the land, securing planning permission for a permanent site.

In the early Nineties, this legal site grew further until there were 37 plots. At the time there was harmony between the village and the gypsies — but that changed dramatically a decade ago.

It was then that Irish travellers, led by a family known as the Sheridans, started to buy the legal plots for up to £50,000 each.

Having secured a foothold, one of their number, John Sheridan, paid £120,000 for a bungalow and land to the east of the legal site. The land had been used — illegally — as a scrapyard, but remained as Green Belt and should have enjoyed the strongest legal protection from development.

Instead, the land was illegally divided into plots, with hardcore and Tarmac laid down. The illegal occupation had begun.

'When it was just the English gypsies there, there wasn't too much impact,' says Mr Gridley.

'However, in 2001, the Irish started coming and there was a real change in behaviour — threats,

intimidation, you name it.'

The impact was also felt by taxpayers as Basildon District Council, the planning authority, became involved.

It took out enforcement notices ordering that the land be restored to its original state.

These were quickly challenged by the travellers, who applied for retrospective planning permission, prompting a series of public inquiries.

Each one of these ruled that the site was illegal. In 2003, John Prescott, then Deputy Prime Minister, supported the rulings — but gave the travellers two years' breathing space to find somewhere to move to.



[caption]

The two years passed, the site expanded and the travellers applied for a judicial review of the eviction

decision. They won a controversial victory in the High Court in May 2008, only to see it overturned by the Court of Appeal at the beginning of last year.

The travellers were receiving a total of £250,000 in state benefits a year.

For the villagers, the ruling was a vindication of their efforts. Supported by the local paper, the Basildon Echo, they proved that many occupants of the site had moved in out of choice, not necessity.

Research using official records showed that many of the families on the site had another, permanent address on a council estate in Wolverhampton which they had chosen to leave.

Further, it was established that in 2002, a number had left legal pitches elsewhere in Essex and moved to Crays Hill, leaving unpaid rent running into hundreds of pounds.

The villagers' investigations also discovered that several travellers on the site had extensive business interests in Europe.

One single mother living on benefits was found to be a director of a firm registered in Calais specialising in the construction of roads and sports grounds.

Others were found to be involved with the bulk importation of furniture from Poland.

Equally galling was the fact that, despite the site being illegal, the travellers were receiving a total of £250,000 in state benefits a year.

A report by Basildon Council revealed that the inhabitants were being subsidised by taxpayers at a cost of £7,650 per plot per year. This included housing benefit paid to travellers who were renting plots from each other.

David McPherson-Davis, former chairman of the local parish council, says the travellers had originally moved onto the site as part of a 'cynical land-grab'.

The 70-year-old retired accountant says: 'Why else would they have left a legal site or a council house to come here?'

Another councillor said the whole episode was a perfect example of how travellers build illegally on the Green Belt for economic reasons.

'They don't want to pay the full market value for legal plots or developable land,' he said.

'It costs less to buy cheap Green Belt land, build there illegally and then take a chance on getting planning permission.'

If that is true, the fact the travellers have managed to spin out their stay for a decade is all the more disgraceful.

'I'll only believe they've gone when I see it,' says Len Gridley. 'They certainly won't go peacefully. It's going to be like the Alamo.'

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Places:

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Let them stay! don't be mean there not doing any harm its only a bit of land

- O'Shea, London, 15/3/2011 13:03

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"threatened to 'bomb, gas and burn' any bailiffs who attempt to evict them." Is this not incitement to terrorism?

- Philip Dagnan, Edinburgh, 15/3/2011 13:02

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Where are they going to go???? That is the worrying thing..... I live nearby and if they come to our town it will ruin it.

- Paul, Essex, 15/3/2011 13:01

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Why should we, the taxpayer, continue to allow Dale Farm to exist? - Disgusted of Norfolk., Norwich uk, 15/3/2011 4:08...Because, oh wise one, you have no idea of who the 'taxpayer' is. You're just another apologist for bigotry and prejudice, and this dire article is just another gypsy-bashing attempt. Why do some people insist on refusing to look at the wider picture? Must you be so wilfully ignorant? Sorry, but it just won't wash with me: EVERYONE on British soil is paying taxes right now, and that includes members of the travelling community. Foreign students, tourists, investors and workers contribute taxes, too, through many means such as VAT, fuel duty, road tax, council tax, income tax etc. In fact, having said that, given that travellers spend most of their time doing precisely what is in their name: travelling, and so they together contribute more in terms of fuel and road taxes than anyone here. Cue a story about how travellers are supporting high fuel prices...

- Andy, Leeds, 15/3/2011 12:59

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Let them stay! don't be so mean

- O'Shea, London, 15/3/2011 12:57

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One resident, young mother-of-two Nora Gore, threatened to 'bomb, gas and burn' any bailiffs who attempt to evict them. 'We have things up our sleeves. It will be like Belfast if they come in here. They haven't a clue what they are up against,' she said. 'We will bomb them, we will gas them, we will burn them if we have to but we are going to fight. 'We are not going to go. I am going to chain myself to the railings and if that doesn't work we have got a few more tricks up our sleeves. Isn't that a form of terrorism? Threatening to bomb, gas and burn? Surely if I were to say this in the middle of the Houses of Parliament I would get arrested. How has she not? As a person who used to live very closely to this site, I have watched the deterioration of the area - and not just the site itself but everything else for miles around. This used to be a wonderful village with scenery to match. Unfortunately now no one has any regard for this once beautiful place.

- Emma, Ex pat, Chicago IL, 15/3/2011 12:53